

THE MEDIA**Editorial Ombudsman**

"Post bungles story. Read all about it—in the Post." The newsboys didn't hawk it that way, but that was the way it looked to more than one discomfited veteran of The Washington Post city room. In a signed column on the editorial page of the Nov. 30 Post, assistant managing editor Richard Harwood explained in detail how his newspaper can take routine stories and blow them out of all proportion. "The tendency to make big pictures out of small facts," he concluded, "is so commonplace that it often appears to be a beatitude in itself."

Specifically, Harwood took the Post to task for two recent stories, one overplaying a Pentagon report issued four weeks

like a knife in the back. Some staffers were not so alarmed. "Dick's on the payroll," shrugged one Post editor. "He's got to convince the public he's not a kept critic. The initial way to do that is to kick your own organization in the behind."

Harwood, a tough, 45-year-old ex-marine who once was national affairs editor for the Post, was handpicked to do the kicking. He was the only staffer considered for ombudsman when the Post's management created the job in September. "We are a big powerful institution in this society and by God we're not perfect," says Harwood, who now catalogues the Post's imperfections in a constant stream of private memoranda to publisher Katharine Graham, executive editor Benjamin Bradlee and managing

all reader complaints, including a loud one from the Justice Department that resulted in a front-page apology to Attorney General John Mitchell, who had been misquoted by the paper. What the Post is seeking, in the words of one of Harwood's columns, is "a new period of introspection, self-analysis and perhaps even candor in the news industry."

So far, Harwood's most controversial achievements have been his published columns on "problems and controversies in news coverage." He had written four prior to last week's bombshell: the first explained the reasoning behind the selection of newspapers; the second ridiculed the much-bungled "Presidential backgrounder" briefings; the third pondered the power of the press in general; the fourth—and by far the best—was a droll effort, "Columnists on the Meanings, If Any, of Elections." In it, Harwood poked fun at the pundits' contradictory election postmortems and outraged some of the Post's syndicated giants.

**Up the Wall:** Reader reaction to Harwood's columns has not been great, though one subscriber did write in to say that the piece on the power of the press "did more than anything in recent years to make me a bit more confident in the Post as a newspaper." Newsroom reaction, on the other hand, has been pronounced. "For some unknown reason," says one veteran editor, "newspapermen despise having mistakes corrected in print. The mere fact of confirming error just sends them up the wall." And another top Post editor admits that "Harwood is beginning to create some uneasiness in the city room. A few people are tightening their seat belts."

Indeed, the problem of staff anguish over Harwood's critical columns was thoroughly aired at a recent editorial summit conference, where various procedures aimed at guaranteeing a reporter's right of reply were discussed. But even that may not satisfy everyone. "It remains to be seen if these critiques are useful," says national editor Ben Bagdikian. "They depend on the judiciousness of the ombudsman—and whether he is accepted by all parties as judicious. Otherwise it sets up a cat-and-dog fight."

The Post's editorial page editor, Philip Geyelin, agrees that Harwood's criticisms could raise staffers' tempers but sees some virtue in this. "The whole point is for us to take our lumps," says Geyelin. "In the course of the bloodletting we help to explain our business to the public." Harwood himself believes that he is "feeling his way" through his first lumps well enough to satisfy his seniors on the Post, and executive editor Ben Bradlee backs him up. Says Bradlee: "We saw the pitfalls, the troubles that would come up when we began to criticize the Post. Sure, there's some discomfort among members of the staff about Dick's job. Some members think it's exciting—even noble. It must be made to work and it will. Just because it's hard doesn't mean we shouldn't do it."



Wally McNamara—Newsweek

Harwood (left) in the Post's city room: 'By God, we're not perfect'

ago, and the other alleging that most U.S. governors' phones have been "bugged"—possibly by governmental agencies. In the first instance, Harwood pointed out, the Post ran a story—under the headline, "Military Hits LBJ on Vietnam"—by an Associated Press reporter who had no time to read the full report. The next day, the paper followed up with a staff-written article—and both pieces, in Harwood's view, unjustifiably concluded that the report attacked President Johnson's handling of the war. On the bugging story, Harwood said, his paper had allowed itself to be misled by columnist Jack Anderson, who had not investigated "most governors" and had "made much of little."

**Knife:** For Harwood, who was recently appointed the Post's editorial "ombudsman" with the assignment of finding fault with his own paper, the Nov. 30 controversial column was all in a day's work. But to the journalists who reported the two stories he criticized, it still felt

editor Eugene Patterson. "My job is mainly monitoring the paper for fairness, balance and perspective. If I see something wrong, and they agree with it, they put out a memo and fix it."

**Ambitious:** Both Harwood and the idea of an editorial ombudsman came to the Post from the Louisville Courier-Journal-Louisville Times. In 1966, the Louisville sister papers appointed their first ombudsman—who functioned as a conduit for reader complaints—and the same year Harwood left their Washington bureau for the Post's national staff. The Post, however, has far more ambitious plans for its ombudsman than were ever imagined in Louisville: For one thing, Harwood is empowered to anticipate complaints.

As a result, Harwood has succeeded in eliminating Muhammad Ali's "slave sports columns, and he hopes to end the injudicious use of such labels as "hippie" and "hard hat." He has also monitored